DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 653 SO 018 852

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TITLE Novus Ordo Seclorum: Or Why Americans Handle Time in Peculiar Ways.
INSTITUTION AFS International/Intercultural Programs, Inc., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Jan 88
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Background; Cultural Influences; *Cultural Traits; *Time; Time Management

ABSTRACT

"A new order of the ages (is born)," is the meaning of the Latin phrase "novus ardo seclorum" which can be found on the back of a U.S. dollar bill. U.S. citizens are concerned with the passage of time, the near future, acting in a timely manner, and accomplishing tasks efficiently. These traits have become part of the national character. Efficiency is the U.S. cultural value that most explains the characteristic approach to business, allowing a desire for short-term profits to eclipse concern for long-term competitiveness. The reasons for this preoccupation with time and efficiency result from the birth and development of the United States as a nation. When the new world was first colonized, hard work and efficiency were essential for survival. One of the most influential faiths was Calvinism, which held that worldly prosperity was an outward sign of salvation. An influential later period in U.S. history was the time of frontier settlement, during which survival depended on getting necessary tasks done in an efficient and effective manner. Basic cultural values and attitudes change at a glacial pace, and the outlook of many U.S. citizens in the late 1980s continues to be that individual worldly success is morally desirable and there is no reason why a person should not attain it with maximum efficiency. (SM)

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by

Dr. Cornelius Lee Grove

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NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM

Or Why Americans Handle Time in Peculiar Ways

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The AFS Center for the Study of Intercultural Learning
New York, NY: January 1988

Novus ordo seclorum? You never heard of it, right? Most likely, you're mistaken. Please take a U.S. dollar bill from your wallet or purse. On its back, to the left, is shown one side of The Great Seal of the United States. Under the pyramid, on the unrolled scroll, you'll read the Motto of The United States of America: "Novus ordo seclorum."

The new Random House unabridged dictionary says that this Latin phrase means "A new order of the ages (is born)." Luigi Barzini, an Italian journalist who has written about why Americans baffle Europeans, says, slightly less reverently, that it means "The world and history begin with us."[1]

While you've got that dollar bill handy, look at the top of the same side of The Great Seal. "Annuit coeptis" is what you read. That means, "He [God] has favored our undertakings." If you think this suggests that Americans are highly optimistic about the success of whatever they attempt to do, you're right.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a young Frenchman who visited the United States nearly 160 years ago and wrote a best-seller about it, noticed certain peculiarities of the citizens of the young republic that, if anything, have become -- well, more peculiar over the years. He entitled one of his chapters,

"Why the Americans Are So Restless in the Midst of Their Prosperity." In it, he wrote:

> [They] are forever brooding over advantages they do not possess. It is strange to see with what feverish ardor the Americans pursue their own welfare, and to watch the vague dread that constantly torments them lest they should not have chosen the shortest path which may lead to it.

Why all this frenzied activity? The young Frenchman offered this rather probable explanation:

> He who has set his heart exclusively upon the pursuit of worldly welfare is always in a hurry, for he has but a limited time at his disposal to reach, to grasp, and to enjoy it. The recollection of the shortness of life is a constant spur to him. Besides the good things that he possesses, he every instant fancies a thousand others that death will prevent him from trying if he does not try to get them soon. This thought fills him with anxiety, fear, and regret and keeps his mind in ceaseless trepidation, which leads him perpetually to change his plans and his abode.[2]

Had de Tocqueville visited the U.S. recently, he certainly would have added that Americans are determined to delay death (or at any rate the appearance of being near death) by large doses of jogging, prune juice, plastic surgery, education, and other mind- and body-improving activities.[3] The pursuit of health as well as wealth and happiness (the latter two often being thought of as identical) give life in the U.S. its rather frenetic quality -- a quality made tolerable for the participants by their assumption that success is all but inevitable (Annuit coeptis) and by their forgetfulness regarding certain aspects of the human condition down through the ages (Novus ordo seclorum).

But a good American would not dwell on these dated views of their way of life. He or she would likely feel more comfort-

able trying to wring some meaning out of mottos and proverbs in current use. First, let's look at a few that underscore the typically American belief that one should be productive, or at least active, as much as possible:

Do it yourself.
Keep up with the Joneses.
Actions speak louder than words.
Keep your nose to the grindstone.
An idle mind is the devil's workshop.
Don't let the grass grow under your feet.
You get out of life what you put into it.
Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today.

It's not that Americans don't believe in leisure. (Well, to be truthful, some of them don't, but these "workaholics" tend to be chided -- gently, though, and with thinly disguised admiration -- for carrying a good thing too far.) The vast middle class views leisure and recreation as having a valuable role to play in life: preparing one mentally and physically for the hard, productive work that soon should follow. After all, one is judged by one's accomplishments, and accomplishments should be visible, measureable, and ever more impressive. There's no reason why leisure should not promote the attainment of accomplishments. (There's no reason, in fact, why leisure itself should not yield accomplishments. Hence the observation that Americans seem to work at their playing.)

Another typical value of Americans has been termed "timeliness of action," a disposition to attempt to foresee problems and opportunities that are likely to occur in the future, and to act promptly in the present to forestall the problems and benefit from the opportunities. The essence of timeliness of action is captured in these well known proverbs and mottos:

First come, first served.
A stitch in time saves nine.
Strike while the iron is hot.
Make hay while the sun shines.
The early bird catches the worm.
There is no time like the present.
An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.
Today is the first day of the rest of your life.

You can understand how a concern with timely action would tend to divert one's attention from just about anything that is not focused on success in the foreseeable future. Success, of course, virtually always implies a beneficial change of some kind. Beneficial change, or progress, has been viewed throughout most of U.S. history as possible in the practical sense and desirable in the moral sense. De Tocqueville noted in the 1830s that America is a land in which "everything is in constant motion and every change seems an improvement. The idea of novelty is there indissolubly connected with the idea of amelioration."[4] There may be those who are questioning the idea of progress in the late 1980s, but, for most Americans, the implicit line of reasoning still goes something like this: Progress is good. Progress is possible for me. My progress depends on my own effort. My effort should be as efficient and effective as possible. Why wait? Why not anticipate?

And now that "foreseeable future" has been mentioned, it should be noted that Americans do not see very far into the future, at least not by the standards of many other peoples. In some cultures, a person sees him- or herself as a link in a generational chain that extends for centuries. Even in cultures with less extensive family awareness, the future may be conceived in terms of scores of years. But in the U.S., where the past is forgotten, where beneficial change is confidently

expected, and where one is judged on his or her own visible accomplishments, the future tends to be seen as near. It's been said that an American's future extends about five years.

Still another trait said to be characteristic of Americans is directness, a relative lack of interest in the more humane aspects of social intercourse in favor of whatever is likely to promote the efficient completion of whatever productive task is at hand. Consider these well known sayings:

Time is money.
Tell it like it is.
Business before pleasure.
Don't beat around the bush.
Take the bull by the horns.
Let's get down to brass tacks.
Put all one's cards on the table.
Say it straight from the shoulder.

To people from other parts of the world who don't wish to make any commitments until a sense of mutual trust has been established, Americans' habit of going more or less straight to the business at hand is viewed as rude, even aggressive. But it's difficult to persuade Americans that acting in any other way is worth the effort. Time is treated in the U.S. as a commodity. Of course, one has a few close friends and family members with whom one can pass the time without undue attention to watch or clock. In the company of most other people, however, questions arise about the worthwhile use of one's time. Sure, Americans admire trusting relationships. But they see nothing wrong with making a commitment to a stranger. After all, why were detailed, legalistic contracts invented?

* * * * *

If these peculiar attitudes and values are truly aspects of what used to be called the "national character" of Americans, one has a right to expect that their influence will be felt in many different kinds of daily activities in the U.S.A.

They are. They certainly permeate the world of American business. To begin with a simple example, critics from inside as well as outside tend to agree that a fundamental weakness of American business has been the readiness with which it allows desire for short-term profits to eclipse concern for long-term competitiveness. Two undisputed insiders, Professors Robert Hayes and William Abernathy of The Harvard Business School, have pointed in corporate seminars and published articles[5] to the overdependence of top executives on "managerial remote control," an approach that relies on financial analysis and views a business in the same way that one would view an investment portfolio. This is "a seductive doctrine that promises the bright student a quick path to the top and that piles its rewards on executives who force through impressive short-term performance, at indeterminate cost to long-term health."[6] And two British journalists have written that

> A more pertinent characteristic shared by most American chief executives is a great emphasis, often amounting to an obsession, on short-term profits. Perhaps because so many of them do not get the top job until they are well into their fifties, and perhaps also because their income is so often boosted by bonuses or stock options that are closely linked to profits, there is at most corporations an unwillingness by professional managers to look seriously ahead into the next five years, let along into the next decade. These professional managers want to produce a good record while they are in office. They are in the top spots only a short time, less than ten years.[7]

"Efficiency" may be the American cultural value that, more than any other, explains the characteristic approach to busi-

ness in the U.S. Efficiency refers, of course, to performance in the best possible manner with the least expenditure of time and other resources. If one is wondering about the performance of a business or corporation, the criterion of performance most likely is going to be the profit margin. Now how much time and how many resources are required to attain that profit? One could measure profit, time, and resources over the long-term but, since measuring efficiency also must be carried out efficiently, short-term measurements are much preferred. No matter whether it's the growth of an entire company's earnings per share or of a single executive's compensation package, the steeper the climb of the graph, the more positive and lasting the impression on all concerned.

The fact is, Americans are deeply preoccupied with attaining efficiency in numerous aspects of their daily life. Saying this is not meant to imply that they are blind to questions of quality, effectiveness, durability, health, humanitarianism, ethics, and the like; it is meant to say that their concern for efficiency is often greater than their concern for these other admittedly worthy ideals. Since World War Two, if not earlier, Americans' desire for "convenience" has been broad-based and vocal, fueling a great deal of what has occurred in the economic and social life of their nation. This drive for convenience has been, fundamentally, an outgrowth of the high value they've placed on efficiency. Convenient modes of transportation, labor-saving conveniences in the home, and convenience foods were intended to reduce the time and effort required by ordinary people to perform the necessary chores of daily life. In the business world, standardization, specialization, and economies of scale -- not to mention mass production and, more recently, robotics and computerization -- were sought as a way of improving efficiency, and therefore profits.

Even in the theory and practice of management, questions of efficiency have been important. Writing about the evolution of management strategies in the U.S., British management consultants Peter Martin and John Nicholls point out that

> The traditional -- or control-oriented -- approach to work-force management took shape during the early part of this century in response to the division of work into small, fixed jobs for which individuals could be held accountable. The actual definition of jobs, as of acceptable standards of performance, rested on "lowest common denominator" assumptions about workers' skill and motivation. There was generally little policy definition with regard to employee voice unless the work force was unionized, in which case damage control strategies predominated. At the heart of this traditional model is the wish to establish order, exercise control, and achieve efficiency in the application of the workforce.

Signs of change have appeared recently, however. Managers in a growing number of locations have been promoting a new relationship between themselves and the workers that Martin and Nicholls term "commitment strategy." What is the underlying motivation here? Ethical concerns? Democratic philosophy?

> Since the early 1970s, companies have experimented at the plant level with a radically different work-force strategy. The more visible pioneers . . . have begun to show how great and productive the contribution of a truly committed work force can be. Stimulated in part by the dramatic turnaround at GM's Tarrytown assembly plant in the mid-1970s, local managers and union officials are increasingly talking about common interests, working to develop mutual trust, and agreeing to sponsor quality-of-work-life (QWL) or employee involvement (EI) activities. Underlying all these policies is a management philosophy . . . that acknowledges the legitimate claims of a company's multiple stakeholders -- owners, employees, customers, and the public. At the center of this philosophy is a belief that eliciting employee commitment will lead to enhanced performance.[8]

This fixation on efficiency can be related to other aspects

of business life, too. As noted above, Americans have a habit of being direct, almost brusque. They're not that way because they're down on warm relationships. They're that way because they value efficiency more. They value their time highly, and they respect the high value that their interlocutor places on his or her time, too. They expected the meeting to begin on time, or nearly on time; to disrupt someone's schedule by being late is to undermine his or her ability to perform efficiently. To miss a deadline has the same effect, not only on individuals but also, quite probably, on a range of operations that were planned to proceed efficiently. To have a meeting over lunch, or dinner, or even breakfast, and not to "talk shop," is to waste the time of people who are dedicated to accomplishing, in a short amount of time, as much as is humanly possible for themselves and for their companies. To have work undone, and not to take it home (or even on one's holiday), is to leave oneself open to suspicion that one is not efficient, and to undermine the ability of others to be efficient. Yes, one's family is important. Sure, one's friends are valued. Of course, one's mental and physical health is critical. But, after all, ...

* * * * *

Saying that Americans are obsessed with the passage of time, with the near future, with acting in a timely manner, and with accomplishing tasks efficiently is not to say that no one else in the world has similar values. (If the truth be told, Americans have been taking a hard lesson or two from the Japanese of late.) Likewise, saying all the above is not to make a sweeping generalization about everyone everywhere in the United States. (Doing business in the Old South is strikingly different from doing it in New York or Chicago. In any one location, varying individual styles will be encountered.)

What can be said with assurance is that time-related issues are high -- very high -- on most Americans' scale of values. People who come from abroad to deal with Americans on business matters and in other significant ways probably will need to make some adjustments to their hosts' peculiar ways of handing time. Perhaps this essay has proved useful in this respect.

There only remains the question of how Americans came to be this way. Here in closing, then, is some informed speculation.

When the New World was first colonized, the people who came here had definite purposes. (One certainly did not undertake such a journey lightly!) Some came to attain religious freedom. Some came for economic freedom or to escape an endless cycle of poverty. Some came in the hope of developing ideal political or social arrangements. Most people who arrived on the shores of North America were highly motivated to accomplish something. They were mostly adults, and life-spans in those days were comparatively short. They had to get down to work.

The New World was not physically hospitable. Of the earliest settlers, over half died within one year of arriving! It was of the utmost importance that one work unceasingly (it was, literally, a life-and-death matter), that one be <u>seen</u> to work by one's neighbors (no pretending to those who depended on you that you weren't concerned), and that one's work be completed on time (for example, before the onset of Winter).

One of the most influential religious faiths among the colonists was Calvinism, which held predestination as one of its principal beliefs. Predestination was the notion that God, in advance, decided which individuals would be saved and which would be damned. The individuals themselves could not do anything at all to change God's mind. But they <u>could</u> discover

their status vis-à-vis God because those who were to be saved would prosper during their lifetimes, while those who were to be damned would do poorly. In such circumstances, a high premium was placed not merely on worldly prosperity, but on conspicuous prosperity. Life was short and illness rampant. The most efficient path to conspicuous prosperity was preferred.

An influential later period in American history was the time of frontier settlement, which continued until about 1890. Life on the frontier, where people customarily lived too far apart to be readily accessible to each other, promoted self-reliance and rewarded individual innovation and productive effort. Survival and prosperity depended heavily on the ability of an individual or nuclear family to get necessary tasks done in a way that was efficient as well as effective.

Throughout American history, most people have been personally mobile in both geographic and economic terms. Freed from kinship ties and social class norms that hampered personal mobility in the Old Country, and provided with new places to go and novel opportunities to seize in the New World, many people threw themselves wholeheartedly into whatever work seemed to promise a decent socioeconomic condition if not a rapid rise to prosperity. Those who made fortunes in a short time or were highly successful in other ways received the admiration of their peers. For America was -- and is -- an individualistic culture, one in which it is desirable to set oneself apart from one's peers by comparatively greater personal accomplishments (so long as one did not harm others on the way up). To attain accomplishments rapidly is even more worthy of admiration.

In many ways, then, it must have seemed to the population of the new republic that, indeed, a new order of the ages was born in them. God was appearing to favor their undertakings. If

this is no longer true, well, so be it. Basic cultural values and attitudes change at a glacial pace, though, and the outlook of many Americans in the late 1980s continues to be that individual worldly success is morally desirable and that there is no reason why one should not attain it with maximum efficiency.

In this new order of the ages, time is precious.

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